



House Bill 227 Testimony

I am Joe Russell, the Health Officer for the Flathead City-County Health Department. I am providing testimony on behalf of the Association of Montana Public Health Officials (AMPHO).

As the lead public health official in Flathead County I can assure you that we take our job to protect the health of the community very seriously. We understand the public health measures that must be taken to prevent the spread of communicable diseases in our communities. As you would believe, I am a strong proponent of immunizations as a protective factor against contracting and subsequently spreading disease. Immunizations have a long, storied history of reducing or eliminating diseases in communities, countries, continents and in fact – the world.

This Bill would allow an exemption to be filed that would allow unvaccinated infants and children to be in close contact with other infants and children that have made every attempt to minimize the threat of contracting disease by vaccination. Children in day care facilities receiving vaccination as prescribed may have only partial immunity to vaccine-preventable disease and remain at high risk of contracting disease. We put our faith in these day care facilities to provide a safe and healthy environment for our children.

Applying the religious exemptions to day care facilities is not the same as applying the existing exemption utilized in schools. As mentioned above, day cared children are more susceptible to contracting disease and in most cases when they do contract disease they may have a more severe illness than a school-age child.

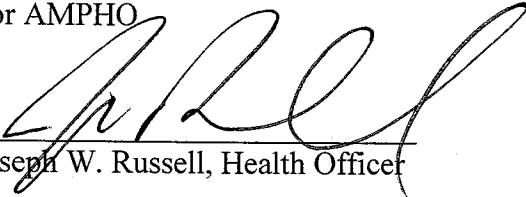
In a school setting when we are notified of the presence of a communicable disease we act quickly to identify those individuals that are ill and close contacts of that individual. We take appropriate action depending upon the disease and setting. In all cases, and as is clearly established in law, we exclude those that are ill and those that may have been exposed and become ill. This social distancing, also referred to as isolation and quarantine, is one of our last lines of defense in the mitigation of disease. This measure has a great impact on parents and the day care facility.

The Highway 93 corridor has been in the throes of a pertussis outbreak for the past several months. When a child with pertussis is identified in a school or day care setting, that child and all close contacts must be treated with an antibiotic and excluded from school until there is no further threat of transmitting disease. In the case of a child (vaccinated or unvaccinated) that has come into contact with an ill child they must be treated and may not return to school for five days. For an unvaccinated child that their parents have elected not to seek treatment that time explodes to 21 days. Now put this scenario into a daycare setting where children are unimmunized or under immunized? Sick day care-aged children cannot be home alone and how many parents will have the leave time accrued to stay home with a sick child for many days or weeks. This will place an undue burden on parents that have done everything possible to protect their children from vaccine-preventable disease.

What about day care facilities? I wonder how many of these facilities will welcome a change that allows the further diminution of immunity in the children that they have taken on the responsibility of providing care for? How fast will they be able to react to assist a local health department in minimizing the threat of further disease transmission? What liabilities do they assume if they are incapable of mounting a time-appropriate response to disease mitigation?

Montana does not need this bill. It was rejected in 2007. It places an undue risk on our children and unnecessary costs to our society. We strongly oppose this Bill.

For AMPHO



Joseph W. Russell, Health Officer